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WOMEN'S NEWS
Tyler Courier-Times-Telegraph
Sunday
Section B DECEMBER 8, 1985

Amigos In Belize

Tyler Team Pitches In To Bring Medical Care To The 'World's End'

EDITOR'S NOTE: Since 1970 people from East Texas have been making regular trips to Belize to supplement the country's medical supplies and equipment. Dr. Kerfoot P. Walker, director of the Tyler-Smith County Health Department, said the groups try to be part of the country's teaching program for public health care. Walker was in Belize in August, and he will leave again on Dec. 27 for the Central American country, this time armed with pillows and linens for local hospitals in addition to medical supplies.

CRIQUE SARCO, Belize (UPI) — Every year volunteer medical teams from Amigos Internacionales travel from the United States to tiny, impoverished Belize where the care available is sporadic and the suffering chronic.

Dr. David Nichols, a dentist from Tyler, has had his share of frustrations during trips to the multi-racial Central American democracy.

"You're not going down there to cure all the deformities in the country," he said. "You're going to get the pus out of their mouths."

Shipwrecked British seamen founded little Belize by accident in 1638 and the nation's progress from British colony to protectorate to independence has been marked by that same ad-hoc, seat-of-the-pants quality.

Formerly British Honduras, Belize is snuggled against the Caribbean between Guatemala and the Mexican state of Quintana Roo. It never was the most remote nation in Central America, only the most inaccessible, thanks to a treacherous 190-mile offshore reef.

Until air travel, it was so tough getting to Belize that Aldous Huxley was moved to remark in 1934, "If the world had any ends, British Honduras would surely be one of them."

The nation scatters its population of 160,000 over a jungle about the size of New Hampshire, some 8,867 square miles. One-third of the people cluster in Belize City, the nation's largest town and leading seaport, a metropolis with no traffic lights and a sewer system dependent on catfish.

The pathway that reaches from Texas to Belize is paved by philanthropy.

"In 1962 a group of men in Athens, 40 miles west of Tyler, formed an interdenominational philanthropic organization — Amigos Internationales," said Dr. Kerfoot Walker, director of the Tyler-Smith County Health Department, which coordinates the expeditions. "They wanted to put their energies and money together to reach out to people in ways other than those practiced by their individual churches.

"In early 1970, we struck an agreement with the government of Belize promising them regular — but intermittent — dental and medical service."

Because medical supplies are hard to come by in Belize, the Amigos take along everything they can cajole from U.S. drug companies.

"Once when I went there the district hospital at Punta Gorda had only eight antibiotic tablets left," Walker said.

As Nichols put it, "Going on one of these medical missions is kind of like going to war."

Amigos sent 12 medics to Belize this year: Dr. George Skipworth, Columbus, Ga.; Nichols, Dr. Tom Cooper, Dr. Jim Holton, Dr. Ernest Brady, Dr. Andrew Quiroz, surgical nurse Loraine Jewett, nurse anesthetist Bill O'Neal, and medical assistants Debbie Morris and Carolyn Jones, all of Tyler; Dr. Mike Kennebrew, New Orleans; and medical assistant Cheryl Chapman, Dallas, who also is a UPI reporter.

The group split, Skipworth, Brady, Nichols, Morris, Jones and Chapman continuing to the jungle and Holton, Kennebrew, Quiroz, Cooper, O'Neal and Jewett staying at the hospital in Belize City.

The trip by dugout from Punta Gorda to the interior Mayan jungle village of Crique Sarco took five hours, a long time to sit motionless on a narrow wooden boat seat.

"Toledo District sometimes is called the forgotten district," said nurse Dorothy Wingard, a Mennonite health care worker in Crique Sarco. "It's the one furthest from the seat of government, and perhaps the most isolated."

The medics began work immediately as twilight fell.

Wingard accompanied Skipworth, Brady and Nichols to the thatched hut of the Choc family. Candalaria Choc was having problems in the final week of her ninth pregnancy, but she refused to leave her husband and eight children to get care.

Choc's husband, stricken with malaria, lay passively in his hammock. The dusty room stank of fever and chickens trailed in and out through the door.

"If she doesn't want to go to hospital, nurse, I won't make her," the husband said. "If God wants her, she die. If He doesn't, she won't."

Some stories, like that of Stephanie Johnson, 3, a cripple, had happier endings.

Stephanie, daughter of village schoolteacher Genevieve Flores, had been playing outside their former home in Belize City when a heavy hurricane door propped against the house fell on her leg.

"The doctors there couldn't set it," Flores said. "They just put a cast on it the way it was."

The knee is growing away from the child's body at about a 30 degree angle. Arrangements will be made through Amigos to bring an orthopedic surgeon from the United States to Belize Hospital for the corrective surgery, Skipworth said, "and after that, she'll grow and run and play like any healthy child, like it never happened."

Nichols said most of the Indians' health problems were caused by diet, especially the popular highly sweetened coffee, which he said eventually killed its devotees.

"Because their (the Indians') teeth rot out early on, they want you to pull all those teeth. They don't realize that when they get rid of their teeth, they're cutting about 20 years off their lives, and this loss of teeth is a real factor in their short lifespan," he said. "It's just sugar, sugar, sugar, and once their teeth are gone, all they can eat are tortillas soaked in that old sweet coffee."

Clinic began shortly after daybreak with the village's most critically ill.

Initially, Skipworth suspected Martin Pop, 10, had Hansen's disease, commonly called leprosy. His parents were convinced the child was under a curse and had been treating him with charms.

Albina Choc, 36, was another suspected victim of Hansen's disease. Juan Isham Jr. came in with malaria; Timothy Bo, 7, had beefworms.

Most patients had parasites.

"If you could whip the enteric (intestinal) diseases, they'd be the healthiest people in the world," Wingard said.

But parasites pull down many of the children and adults so they succumb to dehydration or minor ailments.

"The people have a closed system of dealing with human waste, and as far as they're concerned, it works very well," Wingard said. "The pigs eat it. Then the villagers eat the pigs."

From Crique Sarco the medical team returned to the coast, to the Black Carib village of Barranco scattered back from the shoreline through groves of hibiscus, mango and sawgrass.

Barranco is a regular stop, and the word of the team's arrival is run up the

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—UPI Photos

MEDICAL ASSISTANT CAROLYN JONES OF TYLER WITH PEDRO SHOL IN BELIZE
Shol Is A Regular At Crique Sarco Clinic Where Health Care Is Provided By The Visiting 'Amigos'

MAYAN INDIANS AWAIT MEDICAL CARE FROM DR. GEORGE SKIPWORTH OF COLUMBUS, GA., STANDING, RIGHT
Volunteer Medical Teams Bring Supplies With Them For Use In Treating The Multitude Of Medical And Dental Problems In Belize

New Cures Must Treat Old Devils

CRIQUE SARCO, Belize (UPI) — Medical workers in the Mayan village of Crique Sarco use solar panels to run the washing machine and dental equipment, but God and the devil are still closer to the jungle than the 20th century.

Medical teams like those sent by Amigos Internacionales are sometimes brought up short by the old ways.

Martin Pop, 10, has been covered with pus-filled sores since he was three weeks old. His ears are thick and rotting; his eyebrows have fallen out.

Dr. George Skipworth of Columbus, Ga., decided against his initial suspicion of leprosy and diagnosed an extreme case of atopic dermatitis, or runaway allergic skin reactions. He prescribed a soothing lotion, antibiotics and cool soaks in the river.

Martin's parents agreed to the treatment but declined to remove a bronze disk about the size and shape of a washer tied around the child's neck with red thread, a charm against the evil eye.

Their opinion is that their son is hexed.

District nurse Dorothy Wingard, a Mennonite from Thomas, Okla., who took her training at Glen Oaks Community College in Centerville, Mich., said Belize had changed her skepticism about witchcraft.

"Here, the powers of good and evil are out in the open," she said. "God is here, but so is the devil, and I am convinced this is not just superstition. I have never known the powers of darkness as real as they are in these villages. I used to not believe people could die because of a spell. Now I know better."

The bush doctors can both bless and curse, she said.

"Someone with a grudge can go to a bad bush doctor and, with his help, hurt or even kill the person he considers his enemy," Wingard said. "It's done by burying an object like a small stone painted with blood and bad intent where the vic-

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Huge Marijuana Crop Harvesting Money, U.S. Attention For Belize Natives

BELIZE CITY, Belize (UPI) — The tiny Caribbean nation of Belize is becoming a big headache for U.S. drug agents.

Formerly British Honduras, Belize has everything for becoming a nation of marijuana plantations: poverty; fewer people than the city of Baltimore; no railroads and few roads; proximity to the United States; a national police force numbering fewer than 500; only two interdiction aircraft; abundant rainfall; rich soil; tropical temperatures; and a serene confidence among Belizeans — from cabinet ministers to street vendors — that they won't get caught.

Belizean Breeze is high-quality marijuana comparable to Colombian, and brings top dollar.

U.S. State Department officials and agents from the Justice Department's Drug Enforcement Administration recenty told a force on international narcotics control that marijuana production in Belize has jumped sixfold in the past three years.

In 1984, Belize produced 1,100 metric tons of Breeze, enough to supply 8 percent of U.S. demand, said Judith E. Bertini, DEA chief of operational intelligence — not bad for a country smaller than New Hampshire.

Only Colombia, Mexico and Jamaica, in that order, outstrip Belize in the amount of marijuana they produce for the U.S. market, but Belize is increasingly important because there's apparently no limit on that nation's potential for expansion, Bertini told the committee.

Dr. David Nichols, a Tyler dentist who made his sixth volunteer trip to the Belizean jungles this year with an Amigos medical team, said the boom in drugs was understandable.

said. "Growing dope is against the law, of course, but on the other hand, it's a real temptation if you're just scraping by to know you can buy everything your family needs by diversifying your crops. Especially since there's not much chance you'll get caught."

Another Texan, Dr. Kerfoot Walker, Tyler-Smith County Health Department Director and medical director and coordinator for the Amigos, said Belizean efforts to eradicate the drug had failed.

"They sent out a little plane with one sprayer, he hits one field, and by the time he banks and starts on the next one the growers are shooting at him," Walker said. "He turns around and goes back to his home airstrip and says, 'Hey, I'm not gonna do this any more.'"

In 1984, only an estimated 7 percent, or seven out of every 100 plants, were de-

Joe Marinda, a baggage handler at Belize International Airport, said drug smuggling was a way of life.

"Big plane land here, pick up dope. Big plane land in highway, pick up dope. Everybody getting rich but the little people," he said.

One of the nation's most prominent leaders, former Minister of Energy and Communications Elijio Briceno, 47, was sentenced to seven years in prison and fined $50,000 in U.S. District Court in Raleigh, N.C., for trying to strike a deal to use his political clout to smuggle marijuana and cocaine into the United States.

Briceno's U.S. contacts turned out to be federal Drug Enforcement Administration undercover agents who arrested him in April in Miami.

Agents testified Briceno and others intended to bring more than two tons of mari-

"It is my information that the defendant actually promised to have an airstrip built to handle the size of aircraft needed for the operation," said DEA spokesman William Yost.

The DEA estimates Belize exports $150 million in marijuana annually, compared to $90 million in legal exports such as sugar.

Briceno lost office when his political party, the Nation's United Party, was voted out in December 1984.

After the former minister's downfall, the Belize Reporter noted "Orange Walk (the government) received the news of the arrest of its former area representative with subdued excitement and philosophical aplomb."

Briceno apparently took it harder. The Reporter noted, "The Miami Herald carried a full length picture of him in handcuffs, looking grey and sick at heart."

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